Book Review: Sex, Drugs, and Death: Addressing Youth Problems in American Society

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What is This?
climate change debate and a concise presentation of the main argument. Falasca-Zamponi devotes separate chapters to industrialization and the rise of global capitalism (with attention to Marx and the intellectual tensions between the Enlightenment and Romantic periods), the scale and scope of waste production (introducing the concept of waste and some of its manifestations), the problem of waste disposal (including a discussion of e-waste and global waste flows), and the rise of a modern-era consumption paradigm (drawing, in part, on Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). The author suggests that cumulatively these technological, economic, and ideological forces have obscured the links between consumption, waste, and environmental decline. A final chapter assesses potential solutions and challenges and concludes by encouraging readers to become more knowledgeable and thoughtful in evaluating their own roles in the waste production.

Among the strengths of *Waste and Consumption* are the author’s attention to international processes and connections as well as her inclusion of non-U.S. examples. Falasca-Zamponi deals with significant issues and themes, but the book could be more precise about pinpointing the underlying forces that make waste and consumption particularly weighty social problems in the contemporary era. In various places, the analysis directs readers to consider capitalism, mass production, globalization, morality, the culture industry, individualism, and our notions about freedom; certainly, all of these are relevant. However, the book often treats these forces in their respective historical or intellectual contexts without considering how exactly these causal threads come together in contemporary societies to maintain or exacerbate processes that were set in motion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In short, the values, social forces, and political arrangements that sustain high levels of waste and consumption in present-day society do not receive the sort of sustained, integrated attention that a book devoted to contemporary social problems might be expected to offer. Curiously, there is no discussion of Veblen and conspicuous consumption, and attention to planned obsolescence, the power of advertising, rising inequality, or Alan Schnaiberg’s notion of production treadmills might offer points of connection that would resonate with readers. Although it is critical to explore the historical antecedents to contemporary social problems, ultimately readers may find that the author’s argument does not effectively coalesce as it applies to the present. In sum, students are likely to find the book’s broad scope, analytical ambiguity, and lack of clear solutions somewhat unfulfilling. The book deals with an important issue and carefully outlines some relevant processes and concepts, but its failure to offer a compelling, overarching framework constitutes a prominent limitation.

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As a sociologist who instructs courses centered on youth violence and social problems, I often look for succinct and accessible readings that I can introduce to undergraduate students. Thus, I was excited about the opportunity to review Dr. Tammy Anderson’s book *Sex, Drugs, and Death: Addressing Youth Problems in American Society,* which is part of the *Framing 21st Century Social Issues* series, which provides originally short written texts that provide “overview” to important social issues as well as teachable excerpts from research for an undergraduate audience. This book explores how youth behavior, identity, activities, and lifestyles are associated with a broad spectrum of social problems in the United States. Depiction of the intersections between three predominant social issues for today’s youth is presented in this book: sexuality, substance use, and suicide. Anderson focuses particularly on the interactions that youth have across many contexts such as social networking Internet sites, schools, and clubs. Moreover, discussions about how gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are significant in relation to sexuality, substance use, and suicide for U.S. youth are central to this book.
Chapter 1 begins with introducing the significance of the sociological imagination in relation to youth social problems. In a clear overview, Anderson depicts how utilizing sociological theories to understand how and why things become a social problem as well as the interventions that can address youth social problems. More importantly, Anderson defines and highlights the importance of inequality, diversity, and intersectionality for undergraduates as they continue to learn about youth social problems.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the socially constructed problems associated with youth sexuality. This chapter illustrates a number of complexities and contradictions with how youth sexuality is constructed within the United States. For example, in the current moment of heated debates around same-sex marriage, there is a discussion that provides definitions and a brief overview about GLBT youth and their marginalization in U.S. society. In another instance, Anderson makes it clear that even though media portray “strangers” as being sexual predators, children are most likely to be sexually victimized by a family member. Most notable in this section is the introduction of the problems of sexual assaults among youth. It is widely demonstrated that sexual assault is a major public health and social problem on college campuses. The impact of sexual assault, which includes poor physical health, mental health, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships, is devastating for youth. This is social problem that Anderson continues into the next section.

Chapter 3 discusses the youth social problem of consumption of alcohol and other mood-altering substances. It is made clear that alcohol, followed by marijuana, is the most prevalent substance used by youth in the United States. The social, economic, individual, family, and public health costs of youth consumption of alcohol and other illicit substances are made apparent for undergraduates. What I most appreciate is Anderson’s appeal to undergraduates not to assimilate and reproduce the popular culture portrayal that glorifies the over-consumption of alcohol by youth. Without a doubt, binge drinking is a serious problem that many college professors witness, including myself, on their campuses. Although it is evident that there is a clear relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual violence among youth, it is often unclear for undergraduates. This chapter offers professors the opportunity to discuss in their classrooms the consequences of college binge drinking.

Chapter 4 presents an overview of the youth social problem of suicide. Youth suicide is arguably one of the most tragic events constructed in U.S. society. Even though suicide is more prevalent for older populations, society has defined youth suicide as catastrophic due to the cultural perception of innocence and vulnerability assigned to youth. Anderson also describes how suicide is interrelated to many other social problems that youth endure such as sexual victimization, substance abuse, and bullying.

Chapter 5 addresses how policies can ameliorate the social problems that youth endure. Anderson explains how sociological theory cannot only assist undergraduates toward understanding youth social problems, but also how to address these social issues. It is also made clear that policies should not be a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Anderson concludes by highlighting that the United States continues to be an incredibly diverse society across many social and cultural categories. In turn, the importance of undergraduates to appreciate and apply the concept of intersectionality, not only in relation to youth social problems but also in relation to how they understand, investigate, and live in their social realities, is highlighted.

In summary, Anderson’s book *Sex, Drugs, and Death: Addressing Youth Problems in American Society* can be a valuable addition to any course that focuses on youth violence and social problems. With this book, it is clear that Anderson is trying to get students to understand how their own lives and those around them are shaped by larger, external forces (e.g., culture, history, economics, politics, institutions, etc.). At the same time, Anderson is challenging students to comprehend how we learn things and what we learn (i.e., epistemology) will impact how our society changes and addresses youth violence and social problems in the past, present, and future—especially in relation to sexuality, substance use, and suicide. I commend Dr. Anderson’s effort to making the social and structural complexities associated with youth problems and social problems accessible and pertinent for undergraduate students.